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ABSTRACT

Based on his own experiences with public speaking courses, the instructor of a speech communication course for adults brings students to the task of speaking in front of the room gradually to reduce speech anxiety or communication apprehension. During successive class sessions, students speak sitting in their seats, standing beside their seats, sitting at the instructor's desk, standing behind it, then standing in front of the class. The instructor also distributes a mimeographed page containing succinct information on various kinds of talks, suggested topics for speeches, instruction on the use of index cards, and techniques for relaxation. To help students with phrasing and tempo in their reading, instructions on oral intonation are presented on another worksheet. To eliminate nervous hand gestures, a demonstration or visual aid speech is assigned when students are ready to speak in front of the class. The chairs in the classroom are arranged in a circle, and the instructor introduces himself to the class by his first name only. Finally, students are given an opportunity to listen to their tape recorded voices and critique their own diction. (HTH)

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STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING FEAR IN STUDENTS OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

by Robert Stewart

I first taught public speaking in a continuing education program a number of years ago. I taught the course for ten consecutive terms, and not one student dropped out, which is considered unusual. Why?

Before delving into that, I believe it will be more meaningful if I first recount how I learned not to teach a class in public speaking.

To turn back to those halcyon days when I was an undergraduate: I can never forget that first speech communication class. It was the first of four required in a senior college.

I was a freshman and the assignment was to give a speech. That's all. There were no helpful suggestions; no query about prior instruction (I had never been in a speech class), or, one's feelings. There was no text, or, was any suggested.

My dim recollection, as I later spoke before the class, was that my body trembled and felt rather flushed; I had a "butterfly" stomach; my voice quavered giving it an odd timbre; and the cheeks of my face shook.

The ordeal over, I walked to the instructor's seat and was handed a printed memo with voice and diction nomenclature - certain of which I didn't fathom, a few of which were unsettling - with checks or/and notations alongside. I was agitated and deflated. No student response was elicited; no instructor evaluation presented orally; no private conference held.

Our instructor was a personable young man with a deep, beautiful, resonant voice (the sonorities of which he seemed to enjoy revelling in), and excellent diction, which was somewhat mannered.

As I went on to take a variety of speech communication classes, I ruminated on how that introduct[illegible] course might have

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been taught. To return to the beginning: ultimately I was engaged to teach public speaking to adults. I had no special training or experience. I had two assets however. One was empathy with the fright and trauma one can experience in delivering a speech. The other was having had a plethora of teaching examples of what to avoid.

I started out by saying, as I have many times since, that the easiest, most comfortable place to speak from is one's seat. The most difficult is in front of the room, off to one side, away from the teacher's desk, with nothing in one's hands. Asking a beginner to deliver a speech before the class at the first session is comparable to pushing a novice swimmer into deep water and expecting him/her to swim.

We would, I explained, proceed in gradual stages. At the next session, each one would speak sitting in his/her seat. At the following meeting, each student would talk standing at his/her seat. The third evening each one would stand in the aisle alongside his/her seat. Then we'd move up the aisle.

Following that we'd go to the front of the room. Where is the most comfortable place to speak from there? Sitting in the teacher's seat, which also lends one an air of importance. Where's the next hardest? Standing behind the chair at the teacher's desk.

Shortly we went around the room with each student giving his/her name followed by the words: "I am nervous." (Not one adult student has indicated he/she wasn't with one exception: some pupils in a correctional facility). Each then revealed as much or as little about himself/herself as desired.

Occasionally a person wanted to speak up front at the second or third session. I just let him/her go ahead. In a random case, a pupil might be unable to proceed at the pace of the class. In that case he/she took his/her own tempo sitting in his/her seat if need be.

The above classes were taught an hour a night weekly at

a private school. Several years later I switched to the New York City Board of Education, where classes met evenings two hours a week. I soon realized that if I hoped to retain the students (and my position, since there was an attendance quota), some enrichment was germane. A moot factor was that for a very nominal fee students could enroll in several classes. Thus, dropping one or more meant little to them.

No text was employed, so I initiated the practice of handing out, for students to keep, single mimeographed sheets weekly, each on a different aspect. In back of my mind was the concept that here was a splendid opportunity to teach variegated skills or techniques to help alleviate fear.

Inasmuch as a talk was assigned each week, it was vital at the initial session to discuss speech practice. It may be noted parenthetically that authors of speech communication texts often appear to have nervous or emotional systems at variance with those of many students I have taught, so their advice on practice has to be taken, at least by some of us, gingerly.

I approached the subject of home preparation by referring to a speech course I had taken with Dr. Walter Robinson who advised us, the first evening, to repeat each talk 12 times. My initial reaction, I recalled, was to dismiss this as far-fetched, or, worse. On further reflection I decided to respect his authority and follow his method. In delivering my first speech, I was agreeably surprised to find I had never felt so relaxed and confident. I then quoted the authoritative Dale Carnegie, who iterated: "Practice, practice, practice." He failed to specify, however, how many days or times one should review a speech. A public speaker, it goes without saying, is a performer, and as such should put in a good amount of practice.

At the initial session mentioned above, the mimeographed page contained succint information on sundry kinds of talks, and suggested topics for speeches, with pupils advised to use

index cards (then instructed in their use). In reviewing the material given out in years past in continuing education classes, I find I am now distributing papers largely on the same topics in college classes. Why? Either because they are not covered in our text, or, if they are I wish to teach them dissimilarly.

I have observed a significant omission in speech communication texts of my acquaintance, and this applies whether they have been revised five, six, or, nine times - and, that is, relaxation exercises. I watch classes or demonstrations or workshops in theatre and other performing disciplines where possible. Usually relaxation exercises or/and warm-ups are employed. With the enormous fear that exists, initially at least, in public speaking students, shouldn't there be a section on relaxation in speech texts? Early in the semester I distribute a page to college students, which contains relaxtion exercises in part. The rationale of differential relaxation is elucidated, exercises are demonstrated, then practiced with the group.

Another gap in speech communication texts, while there is much of value in them, may be unknown to their authors because, most fortunately, they never inured the experience. I am referring to the trauma or fright felt so keenly by certain public speaking students that, when they speak, some degree of immobility or lethargy sets in around the organs of articulation. Words may gush forth inexpressively, out of the speaker's control, while voice projection is impeded.

An obvious, partial remedy for this affliction is relaxation exercises. A more potent prescription is exercises to strengthen the muscles of the tongue, tongue-tip, jaws, lips. With such a program undertaken, oral speech exercises for improving clarity of articulation and front placement can be prescribed by the instructor or/and assigned possibly in a speech communication text. On the same page with relaxation exercises, I include both types of speech regimen mentioned directly above. The entire page is captioned: Summary of Warm-Up Exercises.

A facet students may need assistance with is oral phrasing. At the second meeting of our college course in public speaking (or, oral communication) each student reads aloud his/her autobiography composed outside of class. Often students reveal a need for instruction in reading expressively. Inasmuch as I cannot locate a section in our text to impart this knowledge, I distribute a combined information-worksheet on the subject. Phrasing for speaking aloud is called oral punctuation with an explanation of why I designate it so. Interwoven is instruction in stressing prominent words by saying them louder, or more forcefully, or/and pausing after them. Additional practice in the new techniques is provided at the blackboard with sentences culled from an anonymous autobiography of a previous semester. Since the same principles apply in reading aloud as in delivering speeches, students are taught skills that are useful all during the course and beyond.

The above lesson can also be utilized with a student who delivers speeches at too rapid a tempo. I have, in fact, listened to educators at conventions who did this. Admonishing him/her to "slow down" is fruitless, since it bypasses root causes. One is a preponderance of fear, which acts like a driving force to propel the speech organs. Another is that bugbear flabby muscles of articulation, which need strengthening via exercises. Once these problems are being dealt with, the student needs to master a new skill: oral punctuation. I often suggest that in speech practice at home a pupil mark the vertical lines, used to denote slight pauses, in red ink or pencil.

I prefer exercises of my origination for improving vocal resonance to those in a class text. I know, from experience with adult classes in speech and voice improvement, that an excellent starting place is m. The phoneme itself is prolonged accompanied by requisite explanation. Then simple words with the same sound are practiced. A similar procedure is followed with n. I next distribute a page of assorted poetic excerpts

having an abundance of voiced consonants. These are elongated both in group and individual recitations. Permanent improvement will not ensue, of course, without diligent practice.

Another subject I distribute a page on is variety of inflection. Terse, simple sentences are used with arrows drawn alongside indicating the raising or lowering of vocal pitch. Here is another approach for learning how to sound more interesting. Initially students are told to place one finger lightly on their vocal cords and note, as diverse sentences are read aloud, movement up and down according to whether one's pitch goes up or down. We exaggerate rising and falling inflections during class practice taking care never to strain the voice. For additional practice at home, students can improvise their own thoughts or/and read simple text material.

College students should be familiar with a thesaurus. Inasmuch as they may not be, and our text does not provide any information, I present a lesson of my devising.[1]

While not under the rubric of this discussion per se, I feel it would be amiss not to refer to a speaking assignment that is invariably enjoyable: the demonstration, or, visual aid speech. A judicious place to introduce it might be when students are at the point where they are ready to speak before the group. This type of presentation is also advantageous in that since gestures can be troublesome, students will be occupying their hands positively, whether at the blackboard using a pointer, with slides, TV equipment, charts, objects, etc.

It is surprising how the unsuspecting talents of students come to light during this assignment. Here is a secondary school student, for example, standing before the class requesting everyone to take out a blank sheet of notebook paper. On the blackboard he starts drawing lines one by one asking that each person do likewise. Before long a cartoon figure appears: Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck, etc. In a college class, a student places on

the unused instructor's desk a small frying pan, which he then sets atop a mini electric heater that he plugs into a wall outlet. He reaches for a batch of food ingredients and while cooking explains the veal scallopini recipe he is preparing. That soon finished, we all taste bite size morsels of the delicious dish. Some friendly interrogation of the chef follows.

There are other tonic examples: a student removes the scarf from around her neck, and demonstrates how a variety of uses can be made of it; a young man illumines the workings of a musical instrument he has brought, and then plays a melodious selection; a pupil mixes the ingredients and describes the recipe for baking a cake, following which she reveals the finished product, cutting slices for all to enjoy; etc. I have compiled lists of topics chosen by students, and share them with new ones.

In the fall of 1983 I introduced some new elements into the public speaking course. For these I am indebted to Dr. Gordon J. Klopf, Dean, Center for Leadership Development, Bank Street College of Education, New York City with whom I took several graduate courses between 1982 and 1983. From the opening session to the last, we students sat in an oval configuration. No desks were visible. The professor sat down among us and introduced himself as Gordon: he was never called anything else.

Relating this ambiance to public speaking was inevitable. First: one reason for student fear is that seated in conventional rows one becomes acclimated to the backs of people in part. If one is thrust suddenly to the front of the room, which has a dissimilar aura, it induces a feeling of strangeness, even fright; for there has been a rapid and unaccustomed upheaval: from placidly sitting and viewing faceless human forms to standing alone, the focus of attention, staring at what appear to be unfriendly strangers. By contrast facing one's peers continually in class generates warm feeling, and has the effect of being comforting and reassuring.

Secondly, addressing a dean of a college by his given

name, which likely is new to many students even at the graduate level, promotes relaxation for learning.

In the ensuing summer session with Gordon, there were about a dozen students. We met weekday mornings around a long table. At the first meeting, doughnuts and muffins were spread out when we arrived. To one side of the room was an electric percolator, and alongside it a receptacle for boiling water. Tea bags, paper cups, napkins, etc. were nearby. Students were free to help themselves at any time. This procedure continued daily. However, the second day there occurred one change - permanently. The previous day's sweets were replaced by assorted fresh fruit.

As may be surmised, when I met one of my college classes in public speaking in the fall of '83 on a Saturday morning, I requested the students immediately to re-arrange the tablet armchairs, neatly stacked in rows, in oval form. I sat among the pupils and introduced myself as Robert, a novel experience. At the second session I introduced the advantages of having hot beverages and sundry accompaniments at each session for which all, including myself, would share costs equally. The group having assented readily, I made suitable arrangements by telephone with the director of the college cafeteria.

Two other ingredients, in addition to the embellishments noted, were incorporated. One, scarcely new, was ordering a cassette for a class meeting. Students recorded their voices and diction reading in part brief anecdotes from "Laughter the Best Medicine" in Reader's Digest. At another meeting, as indicated, a lesson was taught on Roget.

How well did the assorted techniques and implementations succeed at the college level? The reply is gratifyingly, which should not be surprising, since they had been tested in the crucible of adult classes, or, experienced by me as a graduate student. What is of greater import is that you, the reader, assuming you haven't done so, try one or more of the methods or approaches herein with you students. If, for

example, you have not experienced it, may I suggest you let students give a beginning speech from their seats with the chairs arranged in oval shape and everyone seated within it. Then ask individual students - in class or privately - how he/she felt while delivering the talk in this manner. (Incidentally, one can experiment after awhile with seats arranged rectangularly or/and in semicircular fashion). Or, perhaps you may be courageous enough to attempt an experiment. For example: should you be assigned two sections of college classes in which public speaking is dominant, use your selfsame, familiar approach in one, and in the other test my suggestions (whichever ones you desire). You might find you will have renewed or additional enthusiasm, vigor, or, vitality.

[1]Robert Stewart, "Thesaurus," Bright Idea Exchange, Spectra, Speech Communication Association, September 1983. For a reprint of the article, send a large, self-addressed, stamped envelope to the author at 1901 Avenue P, Brooklyn, NY 11229.